

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

By JOSEPH NEUNER

IN TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING, religious freedom consists in the civil right to live and exercise one's own religion and in granting the same right to adherents of other religions. The struggle for this freedom deeply influenced European history after the Reformation. For Christians living as minorities in other continents it still is a vital concern. This civil freedom is the topic developed in the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on religious freedom*. We explain it briefly below.

However, in our society of religious pluralism, the meaning of religious freedom has much wider dimensions. For Christians, religious freedom means to live their faith in Jesus Christ authentically as their personal commitment, not as imposed on them from outside, nor coming to them accidentally, as if they merely happen to be Christians because they are born into a Catholic, not a Hindu family. They are able to live this faith in a social setting in which all shades of faiths and unbelief are reflected; they live it not in proud isolation with the feeling of belonging to the privileged group that enjoys God's favour – like Noah's family in the saving ark floating over the abyss of destruction; nor in superficial indifference, as if it did not matter to what religion one belongs as all of them search for the same elusive truth. Christian freedom means to live this faith in gratitude for the revelation in Jesus Christ, in respectful, joyful solidarity with the entire human family, in the trusting assurance that with all people we are included in the mystery of God's life and love. This is Christian identity in a pluralistic world.

We are not surprised at the insecurity of many Christians about their identity. Great changes have taken place also in the thinking of the Church itself, from the monolithic Christian world-view of the Middle Ages through the challenges of modern times, leading to the Second Vatican Council. The vision of the Council must gradually be integrated in the Christian conscience. So we begin our essay with remembrances of the past; we outline the breakthrough of the Council, we witness the search for authentic religious freedom in modern society.

The author, having lived in India for many decades, may be excused for presenting the changing situation in the context of the Indian Church, and even, occasionally, speaking in the first person.

The scene of the past

The classical text which for centuries determined the Christian attitude towards other religions comes from Fulgentius of Ruspe, a disciple of St Augustine. The text is most important because it was adopted verbatim by the Council of Florence (1442) and so became the official doctrine of the Church:

(The Roman Church . . .) firmly believes, professes and preaches that no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews, heretics or schismatics can become partakers of eternal life, but they will go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.¹

The rigour of this text was mitigated during later centuries. People who are in good faith, unable to come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, will not be condemned. But the doctrinal principle was maintained; it determined the attitude of Christians towards other religions; it also became the compelling motive for the Church's missionary activity.

In India, Christians formed a minority, little more than 2.5 per cent of the population. In civil and professional life they freely mixed with the rest of their society. They were respected for their educational, medical and other institutions. But as a religious community they lived in a ghetto. A Christian would not enter a Hindu temple; at social occasions, like marriages, a distinction was made between the civic gathering in which they could take part and the religious ritual which remained taboo.

The gulf was deepened by the cultural distinction of Christians from Hindus or Muslims. Apart from Kerala (where Christian communities developed already in the early Christian centuries, without, however, adopting missionary activities in the rest of India), Christian life came to India mostly through the Portuguese via Goa and other centres. Christianity, which in the sixteenth century spread to new continents, was monocultural. Life-style, liturgical worship, theological thinking, all was European. Personalities like de Nobili in South India or Ricci in China remained controversial exceptions. Newly baptized Christians adopted western forms of life and took Portuguese names. So it remained, to a great extent, also during the British rule. The Church had the stamp of a foreign religion.

The cultural gulf that separated Indian Christians from their nation affected also the formation of priests and the development of religious life. I remember the early years, when I came to India, still under the British rule, to teach theology: instruction was in Latin and all textbooks were of European origin. No resentment could be felt against the western garb of seminary life; it was the pride of Indian theologians to attain standards equal to those in Europe. Also, religious communities, apostolic as well as contemplative, were mostly branches of western institutes and followed European patterns. Institutes which originated in India also took their model from the West.

This is, of course, a highly simplified picture of the old, traditional attitude of Christians towards their surroundings, simplified because the Christian communities in India are very different in the south (where the majority of Christians live) and the north; different in cities, villages and tribal areas (the picture would be far more complicated if Africa, the Far East and Oceania were included). The scene is simplified also because 'old, traditional' must be understood not in terms of time only; among many, mostly uneducated people, the past is still very present today. Still, the picture is important because it makes us aware of the complexity of the problem: the Christian identity in India is a matter not of theology only but implies political, social, cultural aspects which are part and parcel of the Church in India, both in the past as well as at present.

The breakthrough in the Second Vatican Council

The *Declaration on religious freedom* deals with the civil relationship between different religious communities. The subtitle indicates the content and the limits of its scope: 'On the right of the person and of communities to social and civil freedom in matters religious'. The background of the document is the co-existence of the Catholic Church with various Christian communities (Anglican, Lutheran, etc.) after the Reformation. According to the Declaration, religious freedom

means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or social groups and of any other power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is forced to act in a manner contrary to his beliefs. Nor is anyone to be constrained from acting in accordance with his beliefs whether privately or publicly.²

The declaration became the most hotly discussed document of the Council. Many bishops were still convinced that countries, whose population was predominantly Catholic, should have the Catholic faith

as state religion, and other religious communities should be tolerated only for the sake of civil harmony. They argued that error has not the same right as truth; evil is not allowed to rank side by side with good on an equal basis. A clear decision of the highest authority in this matter was long overdue. It would have to link the absolute duty of each person to search for the ultimate truth with the full recognition of human freedom. Thus the Council declared:

We believe that the one true religion subsists in the Catholic and apostolic Church to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men . . . On their part all men are bound to seek the truth especially in what concerns God and his Church and to embrace the truth they come to know and to hold fast to it.³

However, the ways by which truth comes to each person are many and the response must be given in freedom. Hence:

The Sacred Synod likewise professes the belief that it is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force. The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth as it makes its entry into the mind at once quietly and with power.⁴

Though the Declaration deals only with the civil relations between religious groups, it contains the basis of all religious freedom: the unique dignity of the human person expressed in the initial words of the text, '*Dignitatis humanae*' (human dignity). Religious freedom does not imply indifference or carelessness as if it did not matter what we believe. Each person is called to be fulfilled in the eternal truth. This truth, however, cannot be imposed on anyone. It must be accepted in the free response to God's word.

The second text, the *Declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions*, is concerned with the one truth and the multitude of religious beliefs in human history. It is the first statement in the history of the Church which deals officially with the relation to the multitude of religions and ideologies. It was needed just 'in our time' (*nostra aetate* – these are the initial words of the text):

when every day men are being drawn closely together and the ties between various peoples are being multiplied (the Church is conscious anew) of her task of fostering unity and love among men and even among nations.⁵

The Church's desire to bridge the gulf, even the enmity, between religions is not merely pragmatic, an imperative for survival of the

human family. It is rooted in the core of its faith, the one divine plan of salvation for the entire human family with its common origin and destiny:

All people comprise a single community and have a common origin . . . and one also is their final goal, God. His providence, his manifestations of goodness and his saving designs extend to all men against the day when the elect will be united in that holy city ablaze with the splendour of God where the nations will walk in his light.⁶

The question of religious pluralism, however, must be asked more precisely: the history of humankind, ancient and new, presents us with a multitude of religions, primitive and highly developed, in doctrinal systems, moral demands and forms of worship; how can this diversity be explained? What is the role of these religions in God's plan of salvation? The Council, obviously, would not enter into problems of the philosophy or theology of religions. But it had to speak about the place of these religions in God's designs.

Early Christian theology found an approach to this problem in the Gospel of John. In his prologue he speaks about God's presence and action in creation through his Word, the divine *Logos*. This was a keyword in Hellenistic philosophy, in the schools of the Stoa and of Platonism. It describes the all-pervading, life-giving divine presence which gives order and destiny to all beings. In using this term, John eliminates all pantheistic connotations that might have been connected with it. The eternal *Logos*, who from the beginning is with God (Jn 1:1), is the medium through whom God created the universe. He is at work also in our salvation as he is 'the true light that enlightens every one coming into the world . . . To all who believed in his name he gave power to become children of God.' This eternal *Logos* is with us in Jesus: 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (Jn 1:1-14).

Thus the eternal *Logos* who is present and active in the world from the beginning is the same as Jesus Christ, who is born in time and who is the centre of the Church. This faith made it possible for the early Church to find a positive approach to the culture and religion that surrounded it. All people are included in God's saving love and guided by his Word. They find salvation if they follow the *Logos* who speaks through their conscience.

Justin writes at the end of the second century:

Whatever lawgivers or philosophers uttered well they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the *Logos* . . . Not only

philosophers and scholars believed but also uneducated people, despising glory, fear and death since he is the power of the ineffable Father.⁷

Through their faith in the *Logos*, present in the world from its origin, the early Christians also found the answer for the occasions when they were ridiculed with the recent origin of their religion compared to the ancient religions of Greece and Rome. Justin answered that 'those who lived according to the *Logos* were Christians'.⁸ Augustine even coined the formula '*Ecclesia ab Abel*': the Church invisibly present among the nations comprises all people who from the beginning lived righteously and suffered persecution from violence and evil. In his *Retractationes*, where he revises all his works, he writes the astonishing words:

The same thing (*ipsa res*) which now is called Christian religion was also with the old; it was not lacking from the beginning of the human race until Christ himself came in the flesh. Then the true religion, which existed already, began to be called Christian.⁹

The idea of the active presence of the *Logos* in the world from the beginning – the same *Logos* who was incarnate in Jesus Christ – was familiar to many early Christian writers, for example Irenaeus, Origen, John Chrysostom.

A deeper penetration, however, of the value and riches of other religions was not possible in the early Church, nor in the Middle Ages. It was blocked by two prevailing trends. First, the growing institutional self-understanding of the Church: Christianity had become the state religion of the Roman Empire. It was firmly established as the dominant religious organization of the world as it was known at the time; it was conscious of being the only true religion to which God's revelation and sanctifying power were entrusted; it stood in contrast to error and evil; other religions were considered outside the realm of salvation.

Second, this firmly established Church was identified with the Mediterranean culture which, during the following centuries, gradually absorbed cultural elements of the Germanic nations. This image of the monocultural Church was not changed even at later periods. In the era of discovery, when new continents were opened, nations of totally different cultures were integrated into a fully western Church.

The Council's *Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions* takes up the early Christian understanding of the divine presence in human history from the beginning, active also in other religions: 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions . . . They often reflect a ray of that truth that enlightens all men.'¹⁰

However, the joyful recognition of the divine light in the religions of the world does not diminish in any way the confession of Jesus Christ as the final and full revelation of God: '[The Catholic Church] proclaims, and must ever proclaim, Christ the way, the truth and the life in whom all men find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself'.¹¹

The two statements are put side by side without any explanation. For many it may seem difficult to reconcile them. The early Church found no conflict in the recognition of the divine presence in the world before the era of Christ and the confession of Jesus Christ as God's final revelation and Saviour, because it is the same *Logos* through whom the world is created and the nations are guided who, in the fullness of time, was incarnate in Jesus Christ. It may be the most important task of modern theology to link the unwavering faith in Jesus Christ with the recognition of God's saving love in all religions, in a theology of religious pluralism.

In search for authenticity

How do modern Indian Christians look at the religion of their surroundings, the religion of their own ancestors? A change has taken place, a slow, but deep, even radical change. Once more, however, we ought to be careful in making general statements about India. Surveys reveal that old concepts still persist among great numbers of Christians, especially the less educated. But the outlook of the educated laity, of priests and theologians, is very different. The Indian Church is searching for the integration of being truly Christian and fully Indian, for spiritual authenticity.

The alienation of the Church from the Indian cultural tradition – we spoke about it in the first section – was the crux of evangelization even from the beginning of the renaissance of Indian culture in the last century. We are amazed to read the words of Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–89), a leading figure in the reawakening of India's cultural inheritance. In his spiritual search he had become an ardent follower and lover of Jesus Christ: 'For twenty years I have cherished Christ in my heart, though often defiled and persecuted by the world. I have found sweetness and joy unutterable in my master Jesus.'

Still, the manner in which Jesus Christ is presented to India is inadequate:

England has sent us a Western Christ, this is indeed to be regretted. Our countrymen find that in this Christ, sent by England, there is something not quite congenial to the native mind . . . Christ has come

to us as an Englishman with English manners and customs about him . . . Thousands even among the most intelligent in the land stand back in moral recoil from a picture of a foreign Christianity trying to invade and subvert Hindu society; and this repugnance unquestionably hinders the progress of the true spirit of Christianity in this country.¹²

From such words (they could be multiplied) we may gather something of the tragedy of a missed chance in the India of the past. The Church did reach out to the poor, to tribals, to low castes – and surely the gospel must be preached to the poor. The Christian contribution to education, health services and social work was highly respected, but the living contact with India's great cultural revival was missed.

The new trends of Christian life and mission in India are marked by the awareness of centuries of national alienation from their own culture, and the reaction against it. The Second Vatican Council recognized the need to develop new Christian communities within the framework and in the spirit of the national cultures. The Mission Decree demands:

The congregation of the faithful, endowed with the riches of its own nation and culture, should be deeply rooted in the people . . . The Christian faithful should live for God and Christ by following the honourable customs of their own nation. As good citizens they should practise true and effective patriotism.¹³

In particular, theologians are expected to integrate the Christian message with the cultural life and the precious traditions of their nation:

From the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and learning, from their arts and sciences those Churches borrow all those things which can contribute to the glory of their creator, the revelation of the Saviour's grace and the proper arrangement of Christian life. If this goal is to be achieved, theological investigation must necessarily be stirred up in each major socio-cultural area.¹⁴

After the Council, Indian theology developed in this spirit.¹⁵ For Indian theologians the spiritual traditions of Hinduism are not simply another religion; they constitute the patrimony of their ancestry and are part of their national inheritance. The rediscovery of India's spiritual treasures led to a resentment against western dominance. As political colonialism had deprived India of the free development of her national and economic life, so the western garb of the Church had blocked their

growth in authentic Indian spirituality. In a study on Indian theology, George Soares Prabhu speaks of the 'great impoverishment of Christian theology which still shows little sign of cross-cultural enrichment, handing out the waters of salvation in European vessels'.¹⁶ He quotes Thomas Merton's broad vision:

The preachers of the gospel in newly discovered continents became preachers and disseminators of European culture and power. They did not enter into dialogue with ancient civilization. They imposed their own monologue, and in preaching Christ they preached themselves. The very ardour of their self-sacrifice and of humility enabled them to do this with clean conscience. But they had omitted to listen to the voice of Christ in the unfamiliar accents of India . . . Whatever India may have had to say to the West was forced to remain silent.

In a number of research seminars the prevailing trends in the thinking of Indian theologians were articulated. They reveal the common conviction that the final revelation in Jesus Christ does not invalidate or simply replace the original divine self-revelation to all peoples from the dawn of history:

Should basic differences of approach, which manifest themselves in diverse ways of experiencing God, be suppressed or subordinated to one fixed set of categories? To reject any part of humanity's religious experience is to reject truth.¹⁷

The judicious reading of ancient texts of Indian spirituality does not alienate us from Christ but widens our perception:

In the meditative reading of these scriptures in community the Holy Spirit leads us to discern his gift offered in these texts. Thus we are led to a progressively fuller realization of the mystery of God and to a deepening of the Christian faith growing into new dimensions and perspectives.¹⁸

In a new responsibility Indians must receive the message of Jesus Christ as Indians, as heirs of their own history of salvation in a humble and at the same time creative response to God's word. So India would find not only her political, but also her religious, freedom:

As the third Christian millennium is fast approaching there is a greater realization that the time has come for the peoples of Asia and Africa not to be mere passive recipients of the Christian kerygma as it has

been articulated over the past centuries of Christian reflection on the Paschal and Pentecostal mystery . . . The emerging new consciousness is not a break with the past but a mutation of self-understanding. We discover our identity by entering into radically new relationships at this stage of mutation.¹⁹

The change consists in the search for the true identity of the Indian Christian. It comprises two realities: the divine revelation in Jesus Christ and the Asian worlds, past and present. It must lead to a truly Indian perception of the person of Jesus:

The Asian theologian must address himself to the crucial problem of spelling out the place of Jesus in the two-eyed vision of Asian reality: What does Jesus mean to Asia in its cultural diversity, its massive poverty and its flourishing religiosity? This is Asia's ultimate challenge to Christian theology, and it will not be met by mere transposition to Asia of christological models worked out in the West.²⁰

Various elements have already been contributed to an Asian understanding of Jesus Christ. However, 'they have yet to flow together into a new christological model which will tell us what "name" Jesus has in Asia today'.²¹

We started with the question, what is religious freedom? It is the authentic expression of the human response to God's saving love. Human life is fulfilled in God. The movement towards the ultimate goal must be authentic, free; it cannot be imposed either by oppressive authority or by alienating models coming from outside. All over the world religion is in danger of becoming too institutionalized. The same is true of the Church: faith is expressed in formulae which died long ago, and we worship with gestures which have been reduced to liturgical rubrics. The religious pluralism of modern society may help us to wake up to a new authenticity of Christian faith and life. We watch young churches in Asia and Africa in their search and struggle for authentic Christian life which came to them through alien channels; they discover it anew in the context of their national spiritual traditions. Their search may inspire us to search for authentic forms of Christian faith and life in old churches as well, so that Jesus Christ may come to life again in the world of today.

NOTES

Abbreviations:

AG *Ad gentes*, Vatican II Decree on the missionary activity of the Church

DH *Dignitatis humanae*, Vatican II Declaration on religious freedom.

DV *Dei verbum*, Vatican II Constitution on divine revelation.

LG *Lumen gentium*, Vatican II Constitution on the Church.

NA *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions.

ND Neuner-Depuis, *The Christian faith in the doctrinal documents of the Catholic Church*.

¹ ND, n 810.

² DH, no 2.

³ DH, no 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ NA, no 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Apology* I, 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Retractationes* 1, 13.

¹⁰ NA, no 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² From H. Staffner, *The significance of Jesus Christ in Asia* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1985), pp 39f.

¹³ AG, no 15.

¹⁴ AG, no 22.

¹⁵ More on this theme is contained in J. Neuner, 'Mission theology after Vatican II', *Journal of Theological Reflection* (Vidyajyoti, April 1994), pp 201-14.

¹⁶ George Soares Prabhu, *Inculturation, liberation, dialogue* (Pune, 1984), p 3.

¹⁷ Research seminar on non-biblical scriptures (Bangalore, 1976), statement n 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁹ Research seminar on shared worship (Bangalore, 1988), statement n 11f.

²⁰ George Soares Prabhu, *op. cit.*, p 21.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 22. The various approaches to an Indian Christology have been critically presented by Jacob Parappally, *Emerging trends in Indian Christology* (Bangalore, 1995).